

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
Luke 5:1-11

Called by God*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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I have a lot of Anglo-Catholic friends on social media. As a result, I come across a number of rather interesting – and admittedly quirky – posts each day. Some time ago, one of my friends shared a post on Facebook about a product called “My Pop-Out Mass Kit.” It’s a 14-piece cardboard set for children that contains everything you need to play mass.

I was so intrigued by this, that I actually went on eBay and bought it. And here it is. It’s really quite amazing. The mass kit includes everything from an altar cross, to a chalice, to a priest’s host. It even includes a fold-out altar top. And there’s a thurible for those of us who love incense! Can you tell how excited I am about this? The first thing I thought was: Elizabeth Carr really needs to see this for our Sunday School program! Anyway, I’ll bring the kit to coffee hour for anyone who would like to check it out.

I mention all this because I’ve noticed that several of my priest friends had “played mass” while growing up – long before they discerned a call to the priesthood. That was the case with me as well. I didn’t have the luxury of a “My Pop-Out Mass Kit.” But I did have water with red food coloring and Wonder Bread that I pressed down and cut into circular wafers. Playing mass was an early sign of my vocational calling.

Now, vocational calling is not something that is limited to priests. Far from it. Each of us in the Body of Christ has a calling to serve God – whether inside or outside of the Church. You might be called to be an actor, a teacher, a filmmaker, a health care worker, or a musician. You might be called to shepherd others (like a taxi driver), to provide for God’s flock (like a pension consultant), or to care for the beauty of God’s creation (like a dog walker). Each of us has a calling – and a ministry – from God. And that calling might evolve throughout our lives.

Today’s gospel reading is about the calling of the first apostles, Peter, James, and John. It’s easy to forget, some two thousand years later, that these three men were not fancy religious leaders or scholarly types. Nor were they members of the social or economic elite. Rather, they were fishermen, simply trying to eke out a living each day.

Peter, James, and John had been fishing all night, and they caught nothing. They were washing their nets near the shore and getting ready to go home. Jesus sees them, and tells them to go into the deep water and to let down their nets one more time. I can just hear their sense of frustration and disbelief. “Is he out his mind?” they must have been saying to themselves. After

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all, they had been working all night long with no results. (Those words didn't make it into the final gospel text.)

But, fortunately for us – and for the institutional Church – Peter, James, and John listen to Jesus. And they end up catching so many fish that their nets begin to break! The catch fills not only one, but two boats. Jesus tells them that “from now on you will be catching people.” And, even though they had just brought in the biggest catch of their lives, the three fishermen left everything and followed Jesus.

This theme of calling in today's gospel also appears in our other readings. In the Old Testament reading, we hear about the prophet Isaiah being called by God to serve as a prophet. “Here am I; send me!” said Isaiah. And in the epistle reading, we hear about St. Paul and his calling to proclaim the gospel to the gentiles – including those in the Church of Corinth.

How have you honored your vocational calling? Where has God called you to let down your nets?

Now, some of you might be trying to figure out what your calling is. It doesn't matter how old you are. After all, Grandma Moses didn't start painting until the age of 78. If so, there are a number of questions that you can ask yourself. What did you love doing as a child? What did you want to be when you grew up? What kind of work makes you feel alive today? And what work would you do, even if you were not paid for it?

Others of you, however, may already know what your vocational calling is. But you may not have followed or nurtured it fully. This is another theme that appears in our readings today. Those who are called by God often experience a strong sense of resistance or unworthiness. Peter, for example, tells Jesus to “go away” because he feels that he is a “sinful man.” Isaiah says “Woe is me!” upon encountering God and the seraphs in the Temple because he is a man of “unclean lips.” And Paul reminds the Corinthians that he is “unfit” to be an apostle because he had “persecuted the church of God” before his conversion.

To be honest, it's these passages that really speak to me. I don't talk about this often, but in some ways it's a miracle that I ever ended up becoming an Episcopal priest. There were just so many times that I said “no,” when God was inviting me to say “yes.”

Some of you may know that I wanted to be a Roman Catholic priest growing up. But I left the church, in anger, after I realized that I was gay. I didn't think I could be a priest – let alone be a Christian. That's when I went to law school and practiced for a number of years as a Wall Street lawyer. “Go away,” I said to God. I am a “sinful man.”

When I ventured back into the church in my early 30s – thanks to discovering the Episcopal Church – my earlier sense of vocational call resurfaced. But by then I had been with Michael for almost a decade, and I didn't think that I could be ordained as an out and partnered gay man. This gave me another excuse to say “no.” “Woe is me,” I said to God. I am a man of “unclean lips.”

And so I decided to pursue graduate studies in theology to quench my thirst and hunger for God. But I thought that I was called to be an academic theologian and not a priest. Being ordained within a tradition that I had at one time resented – and even hated – was not for me. I am “unfit” to serve, I said to God. I had “persecuted the church of God.”

And, finally, when – thanks to the nudging of some amazing mentors – I did enter the ordination process, there were still several times during which I almost dropped out, including just nine months before I was scheduled to be ordained a deacon.

As I said earlier, in some ways it’s a miracle that I ended up being an Episcopal priest. But I am so grateful that God did not give up on me. And I am so grateful that I eventually said “yes” and put down my net one more time – even though I had spent a very long time fishing in deep waters. I cannot imagine not being a priest.

A number of feminist theologians have written about what sin means to women, people of color, LGBT people, and other marginalized people. I have also written about this in my book *From Sin to Amazing Grace*. Instead of thinking about sin as lifting oneself up too high – such as pride or arrogance – these theologians have described sin as not lifting oneself up high enough. That is, many of us are afraid – or ashamed – to follow our vocational calling because we think that we are too sinful, that we are too unclean, or that we are held back by our past. We come up with great excuses to say “no.”

But in today’s readings, God reassures us that God will always give us the grace needed to follow our calling – even if our first reaction is to say “no.” Jesus tells Peter: “Do not be afraid.” The seraphs in the Temple put a live coal to Isaiah’s lips to cleanse it. And Paul encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus despite his past persecution of Christians. God equips us with the grace to say, “Here I am, Lord.” God wants us to say “yes.”

God’s abundant grace continues to this very day. Yesterday, our diocese had its annual celebration of Absalom Jones Day at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Blessed Absalom Jones was the first African American to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church in 1802. How appropriate that the “Freedom Trilogy” is our offertory music for today, especially during this African American History Month. Also yesterday, my friend Fr. Thomas Brown was elected the tenth bishop of the Diocese of Maine. He will be only the third openly-LGBT and partnered bishop to be consecrated in the Episcopal Church.

What is your calling within the Body of Christ? Where is Jesus calling you to put down your net? What did you love to do as a child? What kind of work makes you feel truly alive today? And when have you resisted this call? When have you said “no” to God’s invitation out of fear or shame – instead of trusting in God’s grace?

Jesus tells us: “Do not be afraid.” Will you have the courage to say “Here I am, Lord”?